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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides information on the critical issues involved in providing academic adjustments in a college or university setting for students with psychiatric disabilities. It begins with a brief description of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Information is then presented in a question and answer format that addresses: (1) the identification of students with disabilities; (2) resources available to educators on psychiatric disabilities; (3) signs of mental illness in the campus setting; (4) how mental illness interferes with functioning at school; (5) the need for educators to know about functional limitations; (6) resources that educators can use to determine appropriate academic adjustments; (7) educators' responsibilities regarding academic adjustments; (8) reasonable accommodations; (9) "how" to tell if an academic adjustment request is unreasonable; (10) "how" to set limits or tell a student they are performing poorly in the class without upsetting the person or violating the law; and (11) additional information resources on disabilities and higher education. (CR)

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# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS BY EDUCATORS ABOUT STUDENTS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES

*Tips and Resources on the Rehabilitation Act, ADA, Academic Adjustments, and Support*

by

**Anne Sullivan Soydan**

**Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation**
**Boston University**

**Sponsored by the Tower Foundation**

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# Frequently Asked Questions by Educators about Students with Psychiatric Disabilities

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first "civil rights" legislation to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities. Section 504 in particular requires that qualified individuals with disabilities shall not be excluded from, denied access to, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity that receives federal financial assistance. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 extended these rights, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, public services, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications. As educators, it is important to understand the critical issues involved in providing academic adjustments for students with psychiatric disabilities. Many educators and administrators have serious questions about serving students with psychiatric disabilities on campus, as more and more of these students resume their pursuit of their educational goals. This booklet is an attempt to answer some of those questions and direct educators to relevant resources. Learn what researchers, service providers, and educators at the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University have learned about providing academic adjustments for people with psychiatric disabilities in school settings.

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**Q How do I know if a student really has a disability?**

**A** In most cases, students who are requesting accommodations are receiving services from the disability services or counseling office on campus. These offices require a letter documenting the specific disability from the student's medical doctor. Unless the student discloses his or her specific disability to you, as an instructor are not entitled to the specifics of this information. If a student is requesting an adjustment from you, s/he should present you with verification from the Disability Services Office stating that s/he indeed qualifies for academic adjustments.

**Q Once a student discloses a psychiatric disability, what kind of information do I need and how can I get it?**

**A** In general, you need to know what the present effect of the particular disability will be on the student's functioning as a student in your class. Specifics regarding psychiatric history, diagnosis, and medications are not as relevant as the specific barriers that they present as the student attempts to complete the requirements of the class. Most useful is information about:

- what behaviors to expect as a result of the disability or psychotropic medication;
- how these behaviors interfere with the student's participation and performance in the class;
- what some useful strategies and/or or academic adjustments are that address these barriers and help him/her to function more effectively in the role of student.

One of the best sources of information is from the student him/herself; s/he is the best source of expertise about the impact of disability and its effect on individual functioning. Other sources include the disabilities services office, the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, AHEAD, the Job Accommodation Network or mental health information sources at the library or on the Internet.

**Q How might I recognize signs of mental illness in the campus setting?**

**A** While a single symptom or isolated event is rarely a sign of mental illness, a symptom that occurs frequently, lasts for

several weeks, or becomes a general pattern of an individual's behavior, may indicate the onset of a more serious mental health problem that requires treatment. Some of the most significant indications of a possible mental illness include:

- marked personality change over time,
- confused thinking; strange or grandiose ideas,
- prolonged severe feelings of depression or apathy,
- feelings of extreme highs or lows,
- heightened anxieties, fears, anger or suspicion; blaming others,
- social withdrawal, diminished friendliness, increased self-centeredness,
- denial of obvious problems and a strong resistance to offers of help,
- substance abuse,
- thinking or talking about suicide.

**Q** **How does mental illness interfere with functioning at school?**

**A** Mental illnesses may interfere with functioning in different ways. Many of the illnesses affect a student's ability to do certain things, such as thinking or communicating with others. Often, the person themselves or the professionals working with them can describe the functional limitations that are specific to your student. Please remember that since there are a lot of different types of mental illnesses, that this is not a complete list, nor do these limitations apply to everyone who has a mental illness.

The following is a list* of some of the activities that people with psychiatric disabilities may have trouble doing:

- **Screening out environmental stimuli** – an inability to block out sounds, sights, or odors which interfere with focusing on tasks

  ***Example:*** A student may not be able to attend to a lecture while sitting near a loud fan or be able to focus on studying in a high traffic area.

**Adapted from Mancuso, L.L. (1990). Reasonable accommodations for workers with psychiatric disabilities.* Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal. *14(2), 3–19.*

***Possible solutions:*** Move student away from fan area, turn off fan during lecture, identify quiet study area for student.

- **Sustaining concentration** – restlessness, shortened attention span, easily distracted, remembering verbal directions

  ***Example:*** A student may have trouble focusing on one task for extended periods, have difficulty reading and retaining course material, or have trouble remembering instructions during an exam or a classroom exercise.
  ***Possible solutions:*** Break large projects into smaller tasks, allow brief but more frequent breaks to stretch, walk around, get fresh air, refer student to a tutor to help with study skills and information retention, assign tasks one at a time, write out instructions on board.

- **Maintaining stamina** – having energy to spend a whole day of classes on campus, combating drowsiness due to medications

  ***Example:*** A student my not be able to carry a full-time course load, or take a lengthy exam at one sitting.
  ***Possible solutions:*** Encourage part-time enrollment; segment an exam so that student can take one part in morning, another in the afternoon.

- **Handling time pressures and multiple tasks** – managing assignments and meeting deadlines, prioritizing tasks

  ***Example:*** A student may not know how to decide which assignments should be done first, or complete assignments by the due date.
  ***Possible solutions:*** Break larger assignments and projects down into manageable tasks; distribute a course syllabus of the class topics, assignments, and due dates for the entire semester to help students to plan and prioritize workload.

- **Interacting with others** – getting along, fitting in, chatting with fellow students, reading social cues

  ***Example:*** A student may have difficulty talking to other students, getting notes or discussing assignments, participating in class, meeting students outside of class, or chatting with other students at class breaks.
  ***Possible solutions:*** Establish a mentor or "buddy system" relationship to introduce the student to others or to show the student "the ropes."[7]

- **Responding to negative feedback** – understanding and interpreting criticism or poor grades, difficulty knowing what to do to improve, or how to initiate changes because of low self esteem

  ***Example:*** A student may not seem to understand the feedback given, becomes upset when criticism is given on an assignment, or wants to withdraw from class because of a poor grade on an exam.
  ***Possible solutions:*** Use a feedback loop (ask student's perspective of performance, describe both strengths and weaknesses, suggest specific ways to improve); give student the chance to read written feedback privately, and then discuss; make alternative assignments or "extra credit" options available to all students, thus giving them the opportunity to make up for a poor grade; if necessary, arrange a three-way meeting with the student and the disability services counselor to facilitate feedback.

- **Responding to change** – coping with unexpected changes in coursework, such as changes in the assignments or exam due dates, or changes in instructors

  ***Example:*** A student may need to learn new routines, or feel unduly stressed when requirements or instructors change, or new expectations are introduced midsemester.
  ***Possible solutions:*** Prepare students when possible for changes that will be happening, explain any new course requirements, make a special effort to introduce any new instructors and orient the new instructor to student's needs.

Please be aware that any special strategies that are considered should be discussed with the student in advance, identifying the particular areas of difficulty for that person and individualizing possible solutions that may work for him or her.

**Q** **Why do I need to know about functional limitations?**

**A.** Both Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA state that educational personnel only need to provide accommodations to the known mental or physical limitations of someone with a disability that can be attributed to that disability. School administrators, faculty, and staff are not required to

accommodate limitations due to other characteristics, such as poor literacy skills (that are not due to learning disabilities), low educational levels, inability to meet the minimum entrance requirements of the learning environment, or lack of credentials. In educational settings, these accommodations are called "academic adjustments." You can ask the student to document the types of functional limitations due to the disability that lead to the need for academic adjustments.

**Q** **What academic adjustments are effective?**

**A** For college students with disabilities, academic adjustments may include adaptations in the way specific courses are conducted, the use of auxiliary equipment and support staff, and modifications in academic requirements. A college or university has both the diversity of resources and the flexibility to select the specific aids or services it provides, as long as they are effective. Such aids and services should be selected in consultation with student who will use them. The web site developed by the **Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation** (www.bu.edu/SARPSYCH/reasaccom.html) and the **Job Accommodation Network** (800/526-7234) have many examples of effective accommodations.

**Q** **Do I have to create an academic adjustment for the student or do they have to request it?**

**A** It is the student's responsibility to request the adjustment. The right to an academic adjustment is triggered by a letter from the student's medical doctor documenting the disability. The exact adjustment is usually arrived at after discussion and negotiation with you. The adjustment should be such that it prevents the disability from interfering with the student's performance and it should be something that is reasonable for you to provide. For example, a student might approach you saying that they are having a hard time comprehending the text and they feel it is due to their inability to process written material. You might suggest that they get the text on tape, which might alleviate the problem.

**Q** **How do I know when I am providing "reasonable accommodations" or when am I overaccommodating or going too far?**

**A.** A basic rule of thumb is that the student should be able to meet the core requirements of the course without adjustment. You should not change the curriculum for the course or modify assignments to the degree that they alter the core requirements. For example, changes in test formats or giving extended time or advanced notice to a student would not be altering the requirement of learning course material, and therefore are within reason. If you feel uncomfortable with an adjustment request, discuss it with the Disability Services Office or the Section 504 officer at your institution.

**Q** **How do I know if an academic adjustment request is unreasonable?**

**A.** The academic adjustment should not create an undue burden on you or the institution. If you believe an accommodation request is unreasonable, the best first step is to discuss it with the student and negotiate an acceptable solution. If you cannot reach an acceptable resolution, the next step is to discuss the academic adjustment with the Disabilities Office on campus. Every school is required to have a Section 504 officer on staff who is responsible for seeing that students with disabilities are not discriminated against because of their disabilities. If the campus has a Disabilities Services Office, typically the director is also the Section 504 officer. This officer is also a good resource for checking out the reasonableness of an academic adjustment request.

**Q** **How do I set limits or tell a student they are performing poorly in the class without upsetting the person or violating the law?**

**A.** You should treat a student with a disability as you would any of your students. Follow your normal procedures for a student who is doing poorly in class. Make sure that your specific performance expectations are clearly delineated and communicated, and then track the student's performance, documenting each step. The following are some general principles for serving students with psychiatric disabilities on campus.

- Identify presence of disability.
- Maximize use of current, existing campus support services.

- Recognize and anticipate periods of academic inactivity (stop-outs versus drop-outs).
- Clarify campus policies regarding acceptable student and classroom behavior.
- Identify and consult with school disability services office and /or Section 504 officer.
- Separate treatment issues from education issues.
- Apply same behavioral expectations/code of conduct to students with psychiatric disabilities as you would any other student.
- Help students to become aware of their behavioral responsibilities in the classroom by setting concrete guidelines and clear academic requirements.
- Do not refer students with disabilities to support services in lieu of disciplinary measures. Referral to support services at the request of a student with a psychological disability who is disruptive is appropriate, but not as a disciplinary measure.

## Q Where can I go for more information?

**A**. The following are selected resources (in alphabetical order) which can provide more information on these and related topics:

**ACT Test Administration**
319/337-1332
319/339-3020 (Fax)
319/337-1701 (TT)

ACT (American College Testing) will arrange for individual administration of the ACT assessment for students with physical or perceptual disabilities, given proper documentation of the disability. Individual administrations may be approved, for example, for those who can not attend established test centers, take the tests within the allotted time using regular-type test booklets, or who are confined to hospitals on all scheduled test dates.

**AHEAD**
**Association of Higher Education and Disability**
614/488-4972 (Voice/TT)
614/488-1174 (fax)
http://www.ahead.org

AHEAD is an international, multicultural organization of professionals committed to the full participation in higher education of persons with disabilities. A vital resource, it offers technical assistance, a publication catalog, and a quarterly newsletter sent to its members.

**Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University**
617/353-3549 (voice)
617/353-7701 (TDD)
http://web.bu.edu/SARPSYCH (Center's home page)
http://www.bu.edu./SARPSYCH/reasaccom.html (information on reasonable accommodations)

Conducts research and training, and provides information and technical assistance on issues related to vocational rehabilitation, supported education, and supported employment for people with psychiatric disabilities.

**College Board**
**SAT Services for Students with Disabilities**
609/771-7137
609/771-7681 (Fax)
609/882-4118 (TT)

Through its Admission Testing Program, the College Board provides special arrangements to minimize the possible effects of disabilities on test performance.

**ERIC – Educational Resources Information Center**
http://www.aspensys.com/eric/welcome.html
**ERIC/HE**
**ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education**
202/296-2597
800/773-3742
202/296-8379 (Fax)

The ERIC is a nationwide network that acquires, catalogs, summarizes and provides access to education information from all sources. It provides a variety of publications and offers extensive user assistance in special topic areas.

**HEATH Resource Center**
**American Council on Education**
202/939-9320 or 800/544-3284 (TTY and Voice.)
http://www.acenet.edu (go to HEATH Resource Center)

The Higher Education and Adult Training for People with Disabilities (HEATH) Resource Center operates the National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities. It offers information on a variety of topics, including financial aid for students with disabilities, adults with psychiatric disabilities on campus, strategies for

advising students with disabilities, and options and accommodations in math and foreign language. Many publications may be downloaded from **HEATH's gopher site** (gopher://bobcat-ace.nche.edu).

**Job Accommodation Network**
800/526-7234 (voice/TDD) or 800/ADA-WORK
800/526-4698 (in WV)
800/526-2262 (in Canada)
http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu

Offers information network, free telephone consulting service on the ADA and accommodations, and maintains a database of successful accommodations.

**Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law**
202/467-5730 (voice)
202/467-4232 (TDD)
http://bazelon.org/bazelon/ada.html

Provides information and resources for lawyers and advocates, on the ADA and other laws protecting people with mental disabilities. Summarizes court cases and findings on the ADA, mental health consumers, and employment litigation.

**National Association of Student Personnel Administrators**
1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 418
Washington, DC 20009-5728

An association for student affairs administrators in higher education. Provides student affairs professionals and their institutions with professional development programs and guidance on issues affecting student affairs and higher education. Videotape and book on students with disabilities available.

**National Education Association (NEA)**
202/833-4000 (voice)
202/822-7619 (fax)
http://www.nea.org

A large professional employee organization, including higher education faculty and educational support personnel. NEA lobbies Congress and the Department of Education on federal laws and informs NEA members about implications for them and their students.

For more information on the ADA and people with psychiatric disabilities, visit our web site for employers and educators at:

**www.bu.edu/SARPSYCH/reasaccom.html**

***Here's what you'll find:***

- **What accommodations work**
- **Real life scenarios and how to solve them**
- **Frequently Asked Questions**
- **Tips on handling disclosure, supervision techniques, and other issues**
- **Resources and readings on reasonable accommodations, the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

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**930 Commonwealth Avenue**
**Boston, MA 02215**
**617/353-3549**
**www.bu.edu/SARPSYCH**